

## Until They Weren't by mudhoney

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**Genre:** AU, Angst, Billy Hargrove Tries to Be a Better Person, Billy also has a lot of shit he needs to deal with, Dark-ish Concept, Eventual Smut, F/M, Menstruation, Mentions of Blood, Mentions of alcoholism, Mutual Pining, Past Drug Use, Set before the events of season two, Slow Burn, Step-Sibling Incest, This is honestly incredibly fluffy, Underage Drinking, Underage Drug Use, Underage Smoking

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**Summary:**

After getting injured while riding her skateboard, Max needs Billy to aid in her recovery

# 1. the fall

## Author's Note:

For context- This story is set in an AU where the events of Season 2 have yet to occur. Also, I've aged Max up some, so in this story, she's fifteen.

Feel free to leave any of your thoughts or opinions on this story down below :)

## **MAX**

Max thought there was truly nothing better than a fall day. One where the sky was pale grey and the air was just chilly enough to need a sweater or hoodie. On those days, she could ride her skateboard the most without feeling gross and sweaty.

Today, the first day of Thanksgiving break, was one of those perfect fall days. The sky above was an endless pale grey and the air was just cold enough to need a sweater. It was, in Max's opinion, absolutely perfect riding conditions.

As Max rode up and down her street, she found a part of herself wanting more and more speed. Her need for speed usually wasn't a problem- but it was now, particularly because she wanted to learn how to do a specific trick; one which required a pretty steady amount of speed she couldn't achieve on her own.

She knew she ran the risk of fucking up and falling, but that was alright. She could take care of herself- nothing more than a little patchwork and she'd be on her way. She'd done it before many times.

She figured it'd be as simple as riding up to the tip of her road (given the street was made on a hill) so she could ride down and at least *attempt* the trick.

The wind, almost out of nowhere, picked up as soon as she reached the highest point of the road, blowing copper strands of hair all over. If Max were less stubborn and more intuitive, she might've taken that as a sign to back off- to take a moment to stop and rethink she was about to do.

But, no. Of course not.

It started off simply enough, the rumble of her skateboard wheels traveling through her legs and into her chest, buzzing around in her ribcage as she traveled down the hill. She quickly began gaining speed, but it wasn't enough to worry her.

She'd road down that very strip of asphalt many times before- so she didn't think she had anything to be worried about given she was familiar enough with it.

Except then she felt it.

A pebble. Something so small, so unnoticeable.

Only, when she hit it, it was no longer a minuscule part of the road. Now, it was something that caused her to immediately lose all control, for her wheels locking up and for her to be flung off the board's deck.

It's odd how slowly she seemed to fall. How suddenly, she was acutely aware of how thick her jeans weren't and how thin her sweater happened to be.

And then, she made contact with the asphalt below.

At first, she didn't entirely register the pain. But then, all at once like a downpour, she felt pure, blindingly white hurt wrap itself around her entire body- specifically on her ankle, her palms, and her elbow. She let out a deep groan, feeling as though all the air in her lungs had been completely punched from her chest.

She tried to get up as quickly as possible, even though everything in her was screaming to just stay down. Quickly, she found out she couldn't get up- Not without that overwhelming white pain shooting through her nerves. It was her ankle.

"Fuck!" Max hissed, feeling tears begin to well in her eyes, making her vision blurry. She knew what she'd see if she cuffed her jeans. It's too early for bruising, but she was positive she'd see swelling already.

Her hands- ruthlessly skinned when she fell to the ground- were red with tiny speckles of blood and dirt contrasting against her pale skin, which she wiped on the leg of her jeans.

Her house wasn't even that far away. In fact, she'd fallen almost perfectly in front of it. She figured she could probably force herself up... Accept the headache she now had was brutal and just behind her eyes, making it painful to even look around.

In her fifteen years, she wasn't sure she'd ever experienced this level of pain. The way it tightened her chest to the point where she could hardly breathe, to the way she *swore* she could taste blood.

Her mind was temporarily taken away from her throbbing ankle and road-skinned palms when she heard a familiar scoff. "I thought the whole point of skateboarding was to *not* fall."

Billy.

Suddenly, Max could feel her heart pulsing rapidly in her ear and at the back of her throat. She didn't need this. She couldn't take this-

"F-Fuck off," She hissed, trying her best to hid the hurt in her voice as she attempts to get up. She wasn't about to seem like she needed help- because she didn't; especially not from someone as terrible as Billy.

Billy watched from the porch, unlit cigarette perched between his lips. He was smirking. *Fucking smirking.*

Max, although she tried her best, couldn't bear to stand on her ankle longer than a second. Billy, for a moment, almost felt bad for her. He could tell she was in pain, but that wasn't his problem.

Her ankle couldn't bear her weight, and so she all but fell back down to the ground. It was more graceful this time, landing on her bum. Her lips pressed together to a thin line for a moment, eyes squeezed

shut as she felt pain again wash over her.

Then, so quickly she almost didn't register it, she heard Billy's heavy steps slowly come near her.

She opened her impossibly blue eyes with a harsh glare, one sent directly to Billy.

"Just say the magic words." Billy said, retrieving his lighter from his jacket pocket. He was willing to help her- not because he was a good person, but, instead, because he was unwilling to get the shit beaten out of him by his dad for not helping her.

Billy lit his cig, taking a slow drag as he gaze down at Max, still with that shit-eating grin pulled to his lips.

If it hadn't physically hurt to roll her eyes, Max absolutely would have. She needs to ask for help. Fuck. There was no other way around this. She couldn't properly walk, and she definitely couldn't imagine *crawling* across the street to get to her house.

Through tightly clenched teeth, Max finally spoke with dread lacing each word. "Would you *please* help me up?"

And just like that, she got her wish. Billy bowed down, picking Max up with such ease, it was almost surprising. He wasn't exactly careful as he did so, earning a soft hiss from Max as he lifted her from the ground, carrying her bridal style.

His cigarette dangled from the corner of his mouth, and Max did just about everything in her power to focus on something that *wasn't* him. Because she hated this feeling. This vulnerability; this weakness. It was everything Max tried her best to stray away from, but now, those two feelings were completely overwhelming- almost suffocatingly so.

***BILLY***

Billy almost wanted to laugh at how miserable Max looked, but he knew that'd probably only piss her off more.

He struggled to hold her only for a moment when he was opening the door, and for a moment, Max looked like she was terrified he might drop her. And *that*, that look was enough to cause Billy to breathe a laugh through his nose.

"Would you just calm down? I'm not gonna drop you." He muttered, front teeth biting down on his cigarette so he didn't drop it. Max replied only with a slow huff and a forced half-attempt at an eye roll. Maxine Mayfield, Billy thinks, is scraggly and mistrustful as a feral cat, and as ungrateful as one, too. She gives Billy this defensive glare but keeps whatever she was about to say to herself, likely for the better.

## **MAX**

Once inside the house, Billy set her down on the couch, causing her to harshly bite down on the flesh inside her cheek to keep from crying out in pain. She could tell Billy was, again, hiding a smirk. What a sadistic asshole.

"Aren'tcha gonna say thank you?" Billy asked with that stupid, punchable smile on his face.

Max, as expected, stayed quiet. She needed to ice and wrap her ankle, clean the scrapes on her hands and elbow, and take some pain killer as soon as possible, but she knew all too well that she couldn't do it on her own. Her ankle hurts far too much for her to even consider getting up to go to the kitchen for ice, then to the bathroom for the first aid kit. And fuck, she still had to get her skateboard from outside.

Billy tossed the tv remote in her general direction, earning another harsh glare from Max as it hit against her thigh. Why he always had to be so insufferable to be around, she didn't know.

## ***BILLY***

Billy was no dummy when it came to how injured he was sure Max must've been. The fact she asked for help was more than enough proof to tell him that. He also knew she was as tough as hell. He'd seen her fall before, and almost always, she gets back up and begins again, which only provided further proof of how fucked up she was.

A part of him even felt the tiniest bit bad for her. He knew she needed time to heal, and that she'd probably not be able to ride her board for at least a week- which essentially ruined most of her day plans for that Thanksgiving break.

Billy left the living room when he heard the tv turn on. He ended up in the kitchen, grabbing himself a beer. He wondered how bad her injuries were. It wasn't exactly like he could just ask her and she'd tell him, but they were bad apparently enough to cause her to do something she completely despises; which is asking for help.

## ***MAX***

Max tried closing her eyes, focusing on her breathing instead of the biting pain she had in her ankle. Her attempts at distraction, however, didn't work. They only led to her clenching down on her jaw, which just worsened her headache.

"Do you think you need to go to the hospital?"

Max opened her eyes, but she didn't look at Billy. She, instead, kept them locked onto whatever commercial the tv was playing. "No."

The thought of going to the hospital seemed like it'd take so much time and that it'd cause so much unnecessary bullshit to happen. She knew how to take care of herself, which was maybe the worst part of

it all. She knew what she needed, but she just couldn't do it.

In her peripheral vision, she could see Billy take a slow sip of (what she assumed to be) beer.

Maybe the worst part of it all was that Susan and Neil weren't expected to be home until Wednesday- two days from now. Neil had a business trip out of state, which Susan invited herself along to saying she just wants to " *spend some time with Neil*" which really meant she wanted to make sure he didn't cheat. Both parents being gone was just fine with Max and Billy... Until now.

Now, all Max wanted was for her mom to be back. Susan, although sometimes unbearable to be around with her constant, overly fussy nitpicking, was pretty incredible when it came to care-taking. Although she could be a little pushy when it came to checking up on Max and how she felt, she always knew what to do to help her feel a little better.

She didn't want to have to call her mom... But it was beginning to look like she'd have to.

"Can you get the phone for me?"

## ***BILLY***

Billy frowned, eyes thinning slightly as he stared at Max. "You have to be kidding me. Who are you gonna call?"

He didn't need an answer. He knew why she wanted the phone- so she could call her mom- but he just wanted her to say it. Because *fuck*, it's the first time Billy doesn't have his dad constantly barking in his ear and Max already wants them back.

"You know who." Max muttered, still sending a cold scowl his way.

Fuck.



There wasn't an atom in Billy's being that wanted Susan and (particularly) Neil back. Hell, they'd hardly been gone three hours and Max already wanted them back.

"Don't be stupid, Max. You know Neil would be pissed if he has to drive back here."

## **MAX**

For a moment, Max could feel tears just begin to prick her eyes, but she blinked them away before they had the chance to become anything more. Billy was right. Neil would probably take her board away, too. He's been looking for a reason to, anyway, saying its 'Not something girls should be doing.'

"How bad are you even hurt?" Billy asked. His tone sounded intentionally dismissive, though the look in his eye showed genuine interest.

"I dunno, I just hurt my ankle and elbow." She said. And god, she felt like he was looking right through her. His heavy-lidded gaze was so strong, it almost made it feel hard to breathe. And then he started walking closer.

He set his beer down on the coffee table, then made a motion with his hand as if to say 'Well, show me.'

Max tensed her jaw for a moment before slowly- carefully as to not cause any more pain- rolling up her right sweater sleeve.

Her elbow was red and a bit swollen, with a relatively small cut and some smudged blood surrounding it. It wasn't anything too bad, but it could use some ice and a bandaid.

Billy seemed to chew over what he was looking at, eyes growing clouded with thought. Self consciously, Max began tugging the sleeve down again.

"How bad is your ankle?"

Max internally groaned. Showing him her ankle was going to be a bitch and a half, given it involved taking her shoe and sock off, and then rolling her jean up- which all sounded incredibly painful.

Billy didn't wait for her to answer. He grabbed his beer, setting it to the floor so it didn't tip over before pulling the coffee table before her. She knew what he wanted her to do, but that didn't make it any easier to be done.

Billy looked at her expectantly, crossing his arms over his chest.

Max took a deep breath before slowly setting her leg down on the table. If Susan was there, she'd probably be muttering on about gross it is to have shoes on the coffee table, and how she's gonna be the one who ends up cleaning it. Sitting forward some, Max reached for the cuff of her jean and slowly, painstakingly tugged it up.

She didn't even need to take her sock of shoe off for Billy to see how bad it was. The skin surrounding her normally incredibly fair ankle was now red and angry looking, already considerably swollen compared to her other ankle.

"Well... fuck." Billy mumbled.

## ***BILLY***

Billy knew it'd be bad, but he wasn't expecting it to look so painful. It wasn't anything terrible enough to warrant a trip to the E.R., but it was going to take some time and care to properly heal. And fuck, this verified what he was dreading. Now, if he wanted to keep his head on top of his shoulders, he'd have to take care of the girl who hated him most.

He didn't say anything else before walking off to the kitchen. As he did so, though, he could feel Max's gaze on his back, watching him.

Sometimes, it was strange to Billy just how much Max seemed to hate him. But other times, he could see why she hated being around him so much. He was mean and an asshole- but it was just so genuinely hard to stop being such a mean ass. Still, though, he did feel guilty about it. About all the words he's spat at her, about all the times he reminded her that she wasn't actually his sister- Because he knew his words hurt her.

Sometimes, thinking back on those moments, he feels a genuine pang in his heart because he *knows* it's his fault she hates him so thoroughly, but the thought of ever apologizing for his actions makes him cringe.

Grabbing a plastic sandwich bag, Billy walked to the freezer and began popping ice cube after ice cube into the bag. Zipping the sandwich bag up, Billy grabbed a paper towel before making his way back to the living room.

Again, Max didn't look at him, keeping her gaze fixed on the tv.

"Here." Billy tossed the bag of ice over to Max, allowing for it land just near her.

When she looked at the paper towel covered bag of ice, she frowned. Genuinely. Like the fact Billy willingly got her ice was completely out of her realm of conceptualization. And that look- that look of shock-hurt.

## **MAX**

She knew she should say thanks. This was probably one of the only kind things Billy has ever done for her- Besides that one time he let her eat McDonald's in his car (which only really happened because he was stoned and wanted to get himself something, which resulted in him buying her something as well). But she didn't even get the chance to do so, given Billy walked off- probably to his room.

Max slowly placed the bag of ice on her ankle, eyes immediately

welling from the pain.

Within only five minutes of the ice being on her ankle, the pain seemed to slowly drift off, becoming more and more distant. Still there, definitely still there, but more manageable.

As for her elbow and palms, she figured she'd just have to wait until her ankle was properly numbed before attempting to go into the bathroom to sanitize her wounds. Which was fine. Even though they still burned, she knew she could wait.

## ***BILLY***

It wasn't a little while longer before Billy came out to check on Max. He, unsurprisingly, found her in the same spot he'd left her.

When he returned, though, he had a bottle of ibuprofen and the first aid kit from the bathroom. Again, Max flashed that half-surprised, possibly half-impressed face she'd made earlier, and Billy almost wanted to roll his eyes.

He wasn't doing this because she actually needed his help- he was doing this because he didn't want to get the fuck beaten out of him... Or at least that's what he told himself. It's easier to do things when you think they're self-serving.

Staying put near the doorway, he tossed the bottle of red, circular pills over to her, then the kit. "Take two of these."

He'd been intentionally keeping his distance- almost subconsciously so. After he carried her into the house, he really would prefer to refrain from being that close to her again.

"No drink?" Max asked as she picked the bottle up.

As much as Billy would find it fit for her to dry swallow the pills, he decided to give her *something* of a break.

"The beer I set down earlier. You can drink that." Billy would never willingly share one of his beer's with the redhead, but given it was already half-drunk, probably flat, incredibly cheap, and nearing room-temp, he honestly didn't mind it this time.

## **MAX**

Max's face flashed with an unreadable expression- a mix of confusion and almost-laughter. Before she could protest any further, Billy had turned away, back to the kitchen.

Max considered just taking the pills dry, but she already felt like shit, and she knew the feeling of pills dryly slugging down her esophagus would only worsen the matter.

With a sigh, she shook two tiny pills into the palm of her scrapped up hand and reached over, grabbing the brown bottle carefully. Before she really allowed herself time to think about what she was doing, she took a swig of the beer before popping the pills into her mouth, swallowing quickly with a big gulp- as not to taste the liquid- before wiping her mouth with the back of her hand.

It tasted just as grossly as she expected it to. Of course, she'd tried beer before- with her dad in California, Sam- but this just further proved the idea that beer was disgusting. The yeasty taste lingered on her tongue far longer than she'd have preferred.

In the end, though, she had to admit. She was genuinely surprised at how decent Billy was acting. She figured it was because he was a selfish asshole, but still. The fact he brought her the shit she needed without having to be asked made her think of Billy as more of a person and less like someone Max wished had a toe tag in the morgue.

Maybe, Max thought, this really was a time for change.

## 2. unlikeable

**MAX**

While Max was alone, she cleaned and bandaged her elbow, along with wiping down her palms. She was honestly glad Billy was off in his room, because it meant he didn't get to see her hiss in pain as she tried cleaning herself up with an alcohol pad from the kit. If he had seen, she was sure it would've resulted in her being called a pussy or a wimp- maybe even a combination of the two.

It was a little while longer before Billy made his return back to the living room. When he finally reappeared, the ice he'd given her earlier had almost completely melted but was still cold enough to ease Max's aching ankle, and when combined with the medicine she'd taken earlier, they both worked well to relieve pain and swelling.

Still, though, the sun was just beginning to set over the treetops, and Max wondered what Billy had planned. Only... she realized he had his leather jacket on again. Was he planning on going somewhere? Fuck... was that asshole going to a party?

To Max's surprise, the thought of him leaving her to go to a party was met with genuine discomfort- maybe even a bit of anxiety. Normally, she would be ecstatic at the thought of having the house all to herself for a little while, but now it just seemed like it'd be a cruel joke. Feelings associated with Billy were often annoyance mixed with intimidation, but now, the primary emotion was stress that he'd leave

"Where are you going?" Max asked, hoping the worry in her voice went undetectable. But, given it was Billy she was talking to, it didn't.

Billy watched her with this cool, heavy gaze as he walked past her- almost like she wasn't even someone worth answering. Was he looking for his keys? She wouldn't be surprised if he was, given he constantly misplaced them. Countless times, they'd been late to school because he forgot where he put his damn keys.

"Seriously, Billy... Where are you going?"

## ***BILLY***

As bad as he knew it was, her asking him questions only pissed him off. Almost like she didn't trust him. In retrospect, her mistrust of Billy was more than fair. But still, he didn't like being treated like some kind of criminal- like he was completely incapable of decency.

"Bill-"

"Fuck, Max. I'm going to get a pizza." Billy spat, sending a glare her way. "Unless you feel like getting your ass up and cooking something for dinner."

## ***MAX***

For a moment, she was hurt. It was a pain similar to the feeling she'd felt earlier, like she was this terrible inconvenience to Billy's life. Thankfully, though, that feeling dissipated quickly, only to be replaced with anger.

Billy found his keys, shoving them into his pocket. Without even bothering to say goodbye, he left- slamming the door behind him.

Max ran her palms down her face, sighing deeply. The way the person she despised most managed to be the person she also needed the most was indescribably baffling. In all reality, Max didn't even think she could rely on Billy to take care of her. The older boy could hardly even take care of himself, let alone another human.

Sitting there, alone with the tv softly coloring the walls surrounding her, Max realized something she never even really considered. Billy is just as fucked up as she is- except he doesn't know how to help

himself.

Billy's problems can't be made better by learning a new skateboard trick or by visiting the arcade. His problems are chemical imbalances in the brain, drinking too much, and needing to be seen- even if its for all the wrong reasons. And it wasn't like he would ever admit to his problems, too, which somehow made them even worse.

Billy, Max now thinks, is just a half-hearted death wish wrapped in tired eyes and anger at the world that surrounds him.

Maybe she should pity him. But it's hard to pity someone who's so self-destructive.

For a moment, she wondered how it all started. She'd known Billy for so long as someone who's almost always angry that it was hard to think of him as someone who was nothing more than hurt.

She recalled that time a few years back on Mother's Day where she'd asked Billy where his mom was, only to be told "She's dead." in an alarmingly cold voice. After dinner, while she helped her mom to do the dishes, Susan told her the truth.

Billy's mom wasn't dead, but it "might be better if she were". It was only then that Max realized just how cruel it was of her mom to say something like that.

Max gasped as the door loudly swung open, almost ramming into the wall behind it. There Billy stood, cigarette perched between his lips with a pizza box held in his left arm and a bottle of pop in the other. He had a cold look on his face, one Max had seen many times before. She felt her stomach tighten as she watched him roughly close the door behind himself, a trail of smoke following him as he set the pizza and pop down on the coffee table, just almost hitting Max's ankle.

She glared at him before looking to the box.

"What'd you get?"

"Open the box and see." Billy replied, shouldering his jacket from his body before tossing it on the arm of the couch.



With a soft sigh- why Billy always had to be so difficult, she didn't know- she leaned over and opened the box. Half pineapple, half pepperoni.

"Wow..." Max said quietly, genuinely a bit surprised. Max, much to Billy's distaste, actually enjoyed pineapple on pizza, and the fact he remembered that was kinda nice.

"Just shut up and eat already," Billy mumbled around the filter between his lips, popping himself down next to Max.

## ***BILLY***

Max had this tiny, truly hard-to-notice smile pull at the ends of her lips as she leaned forward, grabbing a slice with slender hands. It was almost like she knew something he didn't, and that's why she was smirking.

Billy sighed through his nose, a stream of grey smoke streaming from his nostrils as he, too, grabbed a slice.

God, he felt so uncomfortable around her. Maybe it was less discomfort and more unease, but still, it was enough to set him on edge. He and Max had always had a weird relationship. Most of the time, the two of them could go about living their lives without ever speaking a word to one another for an entire day- which was just fine with both of them. Other times, though, Billy felt something like pity for the younger girl.

As much as he wished he could blame Max for the move to Hawkins, he knew it wasn't her fault. It was Neil's. After all, Neil was the one who couldn't help but be a home-wrecker. But he couldn't blame his dad, and he absolutely could not blame Susan, so his anger ended up being directed at the only person he knew was completely innocent.

Maybe that was the worst part of all- just how uncontrollably mean he could be to her at times. It wasn't like he was any better. Hell, it wasn't even like she deserved it. Yeah, she could sometimes be bitchy

or rude, but she was also the most loyal person he'd ever met.

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Once he finished his slice of pizza, Billy got up and wandered back into the kitchen. It was weird how quiet it was without Neil there constantly barking about some insignificant bullshit. It was strange but definitely nice, something of a reminder as to what Billy is working for.

See, Billy has been itching to move out. Given he's only 17, though, he knew it'd be a bit tricky- especially if he wants to move back home. Back to California.

He opened the freezer, shuffling some things around until he found what he was looking for.

A bottle of cheap vodka he'd bought a little while ago. In all honesty, he was surprised Susan hadn't tossed it, but he was glad she hadn't. He needed a distraction- something to slow his mind down some- and alcohol was exactly what he was looking for.

He knew his constant drinking habits weren't at all healthy, but that's whatever, because he's young and this is what young people do... right?

Billy didn't even bother to pour it into a glass, just wrapped the freezing bottle in paper towels before returning to the couch.

**MAX**

Billy plopped down next to her with a bottle of what she assumed to be vodka in his hands.

"Neil is gonna notice it's gone." She muttered quietly. She knew she may have been pushing her limits by saying that- knew it might just push Billy into acting like a total dick.

"Neil isn't gonna notice because Neil isn't gonna know." Billy mumbled, twisting the cap off as he stared at the tv. "Plus, it's mine, anyway, dipshit."

Max glared over to him, but he didn't bother to even look at her. Given Max hadn't bothered to turn a light on before the sun set, Billy's face was colored red by the tv, made drastic by dark, cutting shadows.

## ***BILLY***

He brought the bottle to his lips before taking a gulp, keeping his face as stern and settled as possible as the horrid liquid slowly burnt it's way down his throat and into his stomach. Soon, though, he knew he wouldn't feel the pain anymore.

He noticed Max shift, crossing her arms over her stomach as she looked back to the tv.

## ***MAX***

She wanted to know what it tasted like, the vodka. She'd seen how people got when they were drunk, how most of them seemed to become happy. Not Billy, though. When Billy got drunk, he usually just became even more mean. There were rare times when a drunk Billy Hargrove would actually be something nearing nice, when he would look just a little less miserable to be around and breathing.

Max almost wondered what she'd be like if she were drunk. She smiled a bit to herself, thinking how she'd probably end up with

another twisted ankle from trying stupid skateboard tricks.

But then, her smile faded as she realized she probably wouldn't be able to ride again. Snow would be coming soon, and with that comes the inability to ride. She felt her ankle sharply ache again, and she thought then that eating the pizza might have been the wrong idea because of the way her stomach twisted. She gripped down on the edge of the couch cushion, tightly closing her eyes as she tried to breathe through the pain, but fuck, it hurt. She probably should've taken something a bit stronger before.

"The fuck's the matter with you?" Billy asked, and Max felt her face become slightly reddened with embarrassment.

"N-Nothing... My ankle just..." She let out a sharp sigh, releasing the cushion from her death hold.

Before she could say much more, Billy lazily offered her the bottle of vodka, gaze returning to the tv.

"It'll help." Was all he said.

"No- Billy, can you just get me some ice?" She asked quietly. She hated asking things of him because it meant she was somehow in debt to him, and Billy Hargrove was truly one of the last people she would ever want to be in debt to because he's just so fucking smug.

He didn't move, arm still extended. Max rolled her eyes, taking the vodka bottle from him. Instead of drinking the contents inside, she opted to use the cold bottle as an alternative to ice against her ankle. Billy scoffed softly, and Max sighed quietly.

"What? Are you scared of a little alcohol?" Billy asked, his tone just teetering between being teasing and harsh.

Max didn't answer him, which was somehow funny to him because he let out a low chuckle. Maybe he got the answer he wanted from her silence.

It was always a bit strange to Max how quickly Billy could go from being semi-joking and almost playful to downright cold and mean. She assumed, though, his coldness was always there, just beneath the

surface. In all of the years that she'd know him, that coldness was always there, always waiting for the best time to come out.

"You know, you shouldn't just use ice for your ankle," Billy said, keeping his gaze held on the tv before making a slow, almost calculated glance over to Max. "Heat's good for injuries like that."

Max didn't look back to him, but she could feel her face growing red. She thought, for a moment, she was thankful for the darkness surrounding them because *fuck*, she would hate for him to see her blushing, because she didn't know why she was blushing. She could chop it up to getting flustered from annoyance, but she knew it was more than just that.

She didn't want to be out here, not anymore. She just wanted to go to bed. Even though it was still early, hardly even past 6:30, she was tired. Even though she knew she could probably sleep on the couch, she'd rather not. She leaned forward and grabbed hold of the vodka, taking it from her ankle before setting it down on the floor next to the couch. She carefully swung her legs over the table, bracing silently for her feet to meet the ground.

And when they did, *fuck* did it hurt. Deeply, too. While it definitely wasn't as bad as it was when she first fell, the pain was still gut-wrenchingly strong.

"What the hell are you doing?" Billy asked

"I want to go to bed." Max muttered through clenched teeth. Billy let out a half-scoff, not yet offering to help.

Max stood up slowly, trying her best to ease herself into the pain so it didn't become too unbearable. Billy only watched with an annoyingly entertained glint in his eyes as Max began walking.

Her fists were tightly clenched as she limped slowly to the hallway her bedroom was located in, but *fuck*, it was alright. She could do this. She did not need him.

Except when she felt his hand on her waist, gentle but supportive, she felt relieved. And she hated herself for that relief being tied to him,

and for how gentle he was being.

"I've got this." Max said, glancing over to Billy, who only had a smug smirk curled to his lips. She didn't make any further effort to push him away as he stabilized her with each step. She hoped he didn't expect a thanks after this, because she knew she wouldn't be able to provide it. Not with how hard her heart was pulsing, not with how pink her cheeks were.

Soon enough, though, the two of them reached her bedroom door. Billy let go of her, stepping away some. A part of Max felt... almost colder without him there, holding onto her. Max opened her bedroom door, turning the light on before glancing to Billy, who was still stood in a dark hallway.

"Thanks..." She said softly, before closing the door without waiting for a reply. She realized, then, she should have said goodnight. But she pushed that thought down deeply before hobbling over to her bed, plopping herself down.

She breathed a gentle sigh, closing her eyes for a moment. The side of Billy she'd been shown today scared her, because it was a side she kind of liked, and the thought of liking anything about Billy made her stomach twist and knot tightly. Billy wasn't someone worth liking. At least, that's what she told herself.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

hi there! i'm eliza! this is my first chapter working on this book, so go ahead and give me your thoughts on it if you have any!

thank you so much for reading, have a great day ♥

### 3. dawn of a new age

**MAX**

Max was awoken to the rumble of thunder and the sound of rain pattering on her window, alongside a deep ache in her ankle. It wasn't as sharp of a pain as it was yesterday, but it wasn't ready to be walked on just yet.

Rubbing her eyes free of sleep, she peeled her blanket back to see just how bad her ankle looked. She saw just about what she'd expected, though it was far more swollen looking than the day before. She bit her bottom lip, letting out a slow sigh.

She could feel it needed to be wrapped and iced again, which meant either hobbling into the bathroom to get an ACE wrap and then going to the kitchen to bag up some ice, or going to Billy to ask for help.

In truth, getting the job done herself sounded less painful than asking Billy to do it for her- no matter how much the nagging ache in her ankle told her otherwise.

She decided it was probably better to just get it over with.

Swinging her legs from the bed, Max could feel her heart quicken in her chest as she took a deep breath, bracing for pain as the soles of her feet slowly pressed against the cold wooden floor. The pain did come, only it wasn't as severely or blindingly sharp as it was before, and she thought for a moment that she might just be alright

Only when she stood up, the weight of her body was something of a game-changer. The pain was sharp again, brilliantly sharp, but somewhat manageable. At least, it was manageable enough for a trip to the kitchen to grab some ice. Even though Max had a relatively high pain tolerance, she knew anything more than that anything more than a simple two-minute trip would be far too much for her to handle.

She laid back, feet still pressed against the floor as she stared up at her ceiling. She knew what she should do, what would be easiest and least physically painful. To call Billy. To admit to herself and the bastard himself that she wasn't strong enough to take care of herself without relying on another person. Which, she realized was an unhealthy way to think, but it was too hard to see it as anything else other than betraying a part of herself.

Because, while a part of her hated everything Billy stood for- all the anger and hate- she also had been shown a new side of him she didn't expect he had, one that (while still being something of an asshole) managed to be almost nice. And that almost niceness Billy showed her was truly terrifying because it was impossible for her to hate.

Her stomach softly rumbled, pulling away from her thoughts and reminding her she had yet to eat breakfast. She sat up again, deciding she'd go into the bathroom in search of a wrap before trying to head to the kitchen.

She took a deep breath in, standing to her feet. The pain returned, and she winced but refused to sit back down. Instead, she opted for trying to take quick steps.

When she reached her door, she held onto the handle and lifted her right foot- the injured one- to give herself something of a break. She knew pushing herself too hard when she should be healing was the worst thing she could do. She almost cracked a smile as she realized how stupid she must've looked, standing there like a Flamingo with one foot in the air.

That thought didn't last much longer as she opened her door, feet leaving the cold wooden flooring of her bedroom and, instead, meeting the comforting carpet of the hallway as she began walking to the bathroom.

She opened the door, and instead of seeing the empty bathroom she'd expected, she saw Billy.

He was soaking wet with a towel lazily wrapped around his hips, leaving little to the imagination. His sun-kissed muscles were on full display, all shiny and still-dripping from his shower. Max froze as he



glanced at her, water-soaked curl obstructing his heavy gaze just partially. He, in some ways, actually looked beautiful. Like a perfectly-made statue of a Greek God.

"Close the fuckin' door, you're letting all the steam out," Billy replied, and Max finally snapped out of her brief paralysis, promptly slamming the door shut.

She could feel her heart hammering away in her chest- so hard she could almost feel it in her ears. She wanted nothing more than to disappear at that moment. To shrink down into the fibrous sea of eggshell white carpeting beneath her, to disappear forever and never have to deal with this feeling ever again.

Her thoughts were racing so quickly, she hardly even noticed her ankle as she quickly made her way to the kitchen for some ice. She needed to do something to take her mind away from him... Away from the way he looked.

She grabbed a plastic bag, turned to the fridge, opened the freezer up, and began plopping cube after cube of ice into the ziplock bag, only stopping when she realized the tips of her fingers were thoroughly numbed and red.

It wasn't that big of a deal, she told herself, because it wasn't anything of importance. She'd seen him shirtless before, so it wasn't like she'd never seen him like that. It was just... so incredibly unexpected. From the way he looked at her to the feeling it gave her in her chest, like she actually found him something beautiful to be looking at.

She cringed internally at the thought of thinking Billy beautiful- because he wasn't. He was mean and angry and fucking full of hate. But, Max knew there was more to people than the way they allowed themselves to be perceived.

***BILLY***

Billy couldn't care less about Max walking in on him. It wasn't like he was naked- he did have a towel wrapped around his hips- so it wasn't a big deal. Or, at least it shouldn't have been.

The look Max gave him when he walked into the kitchen after getting dressed was enough to make him think it maybe was more of a big deal than he'd initially thought.

With nimble, freckled fingers, Max forced herself to look away from him and to zip up the plastic bag she held.

"You do realize there's a lock on the door, right?" Max asked. She didn't even bother looking at him. His jaw clenched slightly, and he scoffed softly as he walked past her to begin making himself coffee.

"You do realize there's something called knocking, *right*?"

Max rolled her baby blue eyes as she made her way, still with a limp, back to the livingroom. Billy almost wanted to smirk- even if it'd be just to himself.

He could tell she was still flustered, but she also seemed a bit angry. Her walking in on him getting out of the shower was nothing more than an accident, so what she had to be so angry about, Billy wasn't exactly sure of. He didn't care to ask, though, so whatever the hell was going on with her would have to stay with her and her only.

## **MAX**

As she sat there on the couch, ankle again propped up on the coffee table with a pillow underneath it and the baggy of ice on top, she wondered why things suddenly felt so different between her and Billy. Things didn't have a reason to be different- Billy was still relatively the same, just a little bit less of an asshole now.

But somehow, the memory of him picking her up weaseled it's way back into her mind, bringing with it an unfamiliarly heavy feeling in her chest, like the ribs that incased her lungs and heart were

somehow heavier and more constricting, making it harder to breathe.

She could do everything in her power to just ignore it, to ignore him, but she knew it'd be almost impossible. It was like an earworm, she thought, impossible to get rid of until you dealt with it head-on. Maybe, though, she didn't want to deal with it either. So, not only could she not ignore him, but she also didn't want to deal with whatever it was he was making her feel.

And so, when he sat next to her, the smell of cinnamon coffee filling her nostrils, she was torn between what she should do. She could try to ignore him or try to ask why he'd been acting *almost* nice to her recently.

She was torn from her thoughts as she felt him nudge her gently. Her head snapped towards him, already frowning, only to see him holding two cups of coffee.

He didn't say anything to her, didn't even look at her, just kept his hand extended, waiting for her to take the mug from him.

Slowly, as though she was unsure if she was doing the right thing, she took the cup from him. She was surprised to see it wasn't just black coffee- instead, it was a light creamy brown color, looking just the way she liked it. It wasn't often she drank coffee, but when she did, she liked it to be as sweet as possible, almost tooth-achingly so.

"Thanks..." She said softly, almost too quietly to be heard. Billy didn't give any sign he'd heard her, only keeping his eyes on the tv in front of them as he sipped his coffee.

The weather outside picked up, plastering a wall of hard-hitting rain against the window above where she and Billy were sat, almost begging for their attention.

"I hate the weather here." Billy muttered, and it almost startled Max when he spoke. The two of them hardly ever made small-talk, especially not about the weather.

"I think it's nice." Max said softly before sipping her coffee as she

glanced over to Billy. He returned the glance, and almost instantly, Max looked away.

## ***BILLY***

"What's nice about it, then?"

He watched as Max shrugged, keeping her gaze on the weatherman blabbering about how it's expected to be raining a few more inches later this evening. "It's nice for skateboarding, I guess. The hills are good and it's not super humid like it was back home."

*Home.*

She still thought of California as home.

Somehow, that fact made his heart ache just slightly for her. He'd never even considered how she might've felt about the move to Hawkins because he'd only ever acted like it was something only happening to him, like he was the only one with friends and memories and genuine happiness waiting for him back west.

Billy didn't reply to her after that. Not because he didn't want to, but because he couldn't think of anything else to say that wouldn't make him look, in his opinion, stupid. So, he just sipped his black coffee, the two of them silently sitting in one other's presence.

It was strange how quickly one's perspective of another person can change. Thinking back just a few months ago, Billy thought of Max as nothing more than something that got in his way. A bug under his boot. But now, he saw she was more than that. She'd always been more than that.

"Do you miss it?" Max asked, turning her head to face him. "California, I mean." She wanted to talk. She wanted to talk to him- to know how he felt.

Billy shrugged a bit, looking over to her. He saw, for the first time

maybe ever, how beautiful she was. Heartbreakingly so, like a little paint-speckled doll with eyes of ice and blush dusted lips. She looked like the doll every little kid would want, the one that'd probably end up being their most beloved toy.

"Yeah..." He took a deep breath in, his chest rising and falling dramatically. "I definitely don't miss the traffic and all the pollution, but I miss the ocean. Especially at night." He said, forcing himself to look back to the tv. He couldn't handle how intense her gaze was, how interested it was, like what he had to say somehow mattered to her.

"I miss the skateparks," Max said, also looking back to the tv. "There aren't any here. At least, not any that I've found."

Billy realized then how much that must suck for her. When they were back in California, he never really gave much thought to how much time she spent at those parks. She was almost always there, though, always riding alone as a lone wolf. That wasn't to say Max didn't have friends in Cali, because she did, only none of them were interested in skating. He remembered how often he'd bully her for that- saying stupid shit about her lack of skating buddies just to put her down.

Again, he felt that ache in his heart. That pang of... guilt. Something he hadn't felt in so, so very long. Not since his mother left.

He hadn't felt any real guilt since then- hadn't allowed himself to feel anything but anger and upset at the world. Why his hate-enforced walls were just now beginning to crumble, he wasn't sure. He was, however, sure of the fact that he wasn't willing to see what lie behind those walls. The thought of that level of vulnerability truly terrified him, mostly because he was unsure of what he would find.

It was easier to live inside the stories people told about him. He's the guy who performs poorly in school, but is too smart for his own good, nonetheless. He's the always-angry cherry hound, the guy who'd fuck or fight just about anyone. He's got a loudmouth and a sharp tongue, and he always gets what he wants. Because he's Billy Hargrove. Because that's all he'll ever be, that's all he ever can be.

Setting his mug of coffee down on the coffee table, Billy stood up.

"What kind of cereal do you want?" He asked, trying his best to keep any niceness from his tone. It was a question, that's it. There's nothing nice about a simple question.

Max looked up to him, still cradling her mug of coffee between two small hands, mouth falling open just slightly as she thought. "Umm, Froot Loops?" Billy didn't say anything, just turned away and began walking back to the kitchen.

## **MAX**

When he left the room, she became aware of just how cold she felt without him there beside her- even though they weren't even close enough to be exchanging body heat in any significant way. The coffee she held between her hands, although hot, did nothing to warm her body.

Max wondered if there was a name for what she felt. For the heavy feeling in her heart, for the infectious thoughts in her brain. She could call it what it is, name it 'Billy Hargrove', but surely, this isn't something that's just happening to her. Certainly, other people have their own 'Billy Hargrove's, so what do they call theirs?

She didn't care to think about it any longer, so she actively forced herself to focus on something else.

Her dad.

Maybe she should call him soon to see how he's been. A twinge of anger re-appeared as she realized she, a 15-year-old, shouldn't have to be the one calling to see how her dad's doing. Doesn't he care enough to call her? To ask her how she's been? To even act like he gives a fuck? They were supposed to talk often- weekly, at least. But she hasn't spoken to Sam since she moved to Hawkin's, which was nearing a month ago now.

She knows she's being unfair to him, that her anger isn't rational. Because she knew Susan had told him not to bother calling. The first

week they'd arrived, while Max was still unpacking some things in the living room, she heard her mom on the phone trying her best to keep quiet. Then, she heard "No, Sam, she doesn't want to talk to you."

Still... though. For whatever reason, it still hurt. Her anger should lie with her Mom, and it does, but it's also with her Dad. She realizes how stupid it is of her because maybe it is for the better that they haven't spoken. She misses him terribly, and talking to him probably wouldn't make her miss him any less, so... there she was again, back to the conclusion that ignoring her problems- no matter how big they manifest- was for the better.

## ***BILLY***

When he finally returned to the living room, a bowl of cereal carefully held in each large hand, Max didn't look at him. It was different from the times before, though, because this time around, she looked to be miles away from her place on the couch. Her eyes were glossed over and her mouth was drawn downward slightly into an almost-frown. He could tell whatever she was thinking about wasn't pleasant. Before his pride got a chance to stop his mouth from running, he found himself speaking. "You alright?"

Immediately, Max broke from her thoughts, her gaze snapping over lightning-quick to meet his. "What? Oh- Uh, yeah, I'm fine." She said, sitting up slightly. She placed her coffee down on the nightstand next to the couch's armrest as Billy handed her her breakfast.

It didn't take a genius to see she wasn't as fine as she'd like to have believed.

"Look..." Billy sat down next to her, sighing deeply like whatever he was going to say next physically pained him to do so. "Not that I care or anything, but if something's wrong, tell me. I mean, not if it's too stupid or annoying, but I'm here to listen, or whatever."

Max went quiet, looking down. A curtain of copper red hair blocked her face from his vision, but Billy was almost sure of what he'd see. She'd be blushing, probably from embarrassment. "I'll keep that in mind." She said quietly before shoving a spoonful of colorful cereal into her mouth.

Billy only sighed, realizing it wasn't actually all that hard to be nice to a girl like Max. She's stubborn as all Hell, but so was Billy. Stubbornness, he thought, was nothing more than a simultaneous attempt at control and rebellion, to put one's foot down and act like you have something worth rebelling against.

"Oh," Billy said, stuffing his hand into the pocket of his jeans. "And here." He tossed an ACE wrap for her ankle into her lap. He'd grabbed it for her while he was up getting their breakfast together.

She glanced down at her lap, and the very smallest of smiles pulled at the ends of her lips.

"You don't need help putting it on, right?"

Max glanced over to him, scoffing, though it was mostly playful, before nodding. "I think I can manage."

A small laugh came through Billy's nose as he watched her lean forward, removing the bag of ice from her reddened foot. She crossed her left leg over her right knee to make it easier to reach before starting the wrap directly on her ankle. She was struggling a bit as she wrapped it, to the point where it almost became annoying to watch.

Finally, with a little huff, Billy scooted closer to her to the point they were shoulder to shoulder. "Give me that," He said, taking the wrap away from her before beginning to re-roll it. "You gotta start at the ball of your foot."

**MAX**



It seemed to Max that personal space was no longer something that existed to Billy as he moved close enough for her to smell whatever cologne he'd put on after his shower. It was something strong but pleasant, reminding her slightly of blackberries, pomegranate, and summer-time.

Billy looked at her face, seeking for her approval before touching her, a gesture which didn't go unlogged in her database of 'Nice Stuff Billy's Done', before he began to gently wrap her foot, starting just below her toes.

She could feel her heart beginning to pound in her chest as she tried to stay as still as possible, jaw tensing as he wrapped further up her foot, being sure to keep the bandage taut against her skin. His comfortingly warm hands moved quickly, and she was sure he'd've had experience being injured himself with how confidently yet gently he wrapped her ankle.

Soon enough, he was securing the wrap with a safety pin. She watched his eyes scan over her ankle again, just to make sure he'd done a good job before moving back to his side of the couch. Again, when he left her side, he seemed to talk all the warmth surrounding her with him. She kept her gaze down on her foot, impressed by the way it already felt better.

"You better remember what I did 'cause I'm not doing that shit again." Billy said, reaching to grab his bowl of cereal. And for a moment, Max thought how she'd probably never forget the way he wrapped her ankle for her, for better or worse.

"How'd you learn to do that so well?" Max asked. She genuinely wanted to know. Plus, it was kind of nice talking to him like he was a human.

"You get injured while working out sometimes, or when playing basketball. It's not worth visiting the doctor each time you fuck yourself up, so you just sorta teach yourself what to and what not to do." He replied, to which Max only hummed softly in thought and acknowledgment.

## **BILLY**

It's weird, Billy thinks, to have her name in his head without the twinge of irritation that used to be so strongly associated with her; annoyance that would make him spit venomous words Max's way. As much as he didn't want to admit it, it was actually sort of nice having her there, just the two of them.

He thinks, maybe all the anger and hatred he would send her way was because of Neil. Billy wasn't ever one to do what his father told him, so when it came to forced 'respect and responsibility', Billy would rebel by being a total dick to Max, because that was somehow easier than doing as his father said.

Without Neil there, though, things became more permissive and more enjoyable. Not just in day to day life, but also in being kind to Max. Still, he wouldn't be winning any Step-Brother of the Year awards any time soon, but maybe, just maybe, he can keep this up- even when Neil comes back. Max didn't deserve to pay for Neil's sins, and it was only now that Billy was truly beginning to recognize that.

## **MAX**

Steadily, Max rose from her spot on the couch. She grabbed her now-finished bowl of cereal before also grabbing her almost-empty mug of coffee.

"What're you doing?" Billy asked, frowning slightly as he watched her. She was sure it was obvious just by the way she was standing that she was still pretty incapable of walking much on her own, but she also had this determination in her eyes.

"Taking these to the sink," She replied, beginning to walk. Each step she took was calculated and quick, as to feel as little pain as possible.

With a dramatic sigh, Billy stood up, taking hold of his mug and bowl before walking a few steps next to Max.

"Give." Was all he said, lowly, and Max knew she wouldn't be able to just say no this time.

With a sigh, she carefully handed him the bowl and mug before crossing her arms, mumbling "I could've done it myself." under her breath as she returned to the couch. Whether or not Billy heard what she said, she couldn't exactly tell, given he walked away without giving her a reply.

Now that her ankle was properly wrapped up, she genuinely felt like she'd be alright enough to walk to the kitchen and back without needing assistance from Billy.

But of course, he thought otherwise, and somehow, no matter what, Billy always happened to be right.

## 4. web of emotions

**MAX**

It seemed apparent that the storm blowing around outside the house only had intentions of growing larger and more powerful as the hours slipped by in the day.

The storm wasn't at all a problem until it began causing the television to cut out with static, making it completely unbearable to listen to, which took away one of Max's only forms of distraction.

It became unbearable just sitting there with the rain tapping harshly on the window outside. She knew if she didn't find something to do, her thoughts would begin to wonder places they had no right to be, so she opted to shuffle her way to her room to grab some clothes, then to the (thankfully unoccupied) bathroom for a shower.

While the water heated up, she sat herself down on the toilet to begin removing the bandage and wrap from her elbow and ankle, being sure to be as careful as possible, even though the pain was still jaw-clenchingly powerful.

Even though she was in pain, she still found many thoughts found themselves drifting through her consciousness, almost all generally having the same topic in common.

Billy.

It felt like something had truly shifted between the two of them, similar in feeling to the night turning to day. What was once recognizable as nothing more than distaste and disgust towards Billy was now a totally different plane to be explored. It was considerably powerful, too; frighteningly so.

As Max slowly stepped into the shower, her face twisted up in hurt for a moment as her now unwrapped and unsupported foot bore her weight. The water lightly stung against her back as she grabbed for

the bottle of shampoo, but it was a welcomed feeling given it felt as though it were helping to wash away some of the thoughts Max was most afraid of facing... Like why she kind of liked the attention she had been getting from Billy.

Billy wasn't someone she should want attention from. He's nothing more than an angry kid upset with the world around him... who also took the time to take care of Max when she needed him most.

Now, she had nothing left but her thoughts and that terrifying feeling in her chest. So, she has to plunge her hands into this muddy pool of her own mind to pull out what *she* really thinks, what she feels and why. When did she start losing herself, or is this who she truly is?

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Max finished up with her shower, getting dressed in a grey t-shirt and a pair of dark jeans, opting to braid her copper locks in two pig-tail braids that hung at each of her shoulders. In truth, the shower did do wonders to make her feel better.

But still, her mind felt muddy, as though there were something wrong with her that couldn't be fixed by the things she usually did to make herself feel better.

She couldn't skate and, given the storm was still raging outside, she couldn't watch tv. She couldn't explore around her new-ish town and she definitely couldn't spend time with friends given all of her friends were 2,000 miles away. All the things she would've enjoyed doing she can no longer do.

What a cruel realization.

Before leaving the bathroom, Max patched herself up again with bandages, properly wrapping her ankle before leaving the comfortably warm bathroom and entering the almost chillingly cool hallway.

She, with a momentary mix of both dread and excitement, realized that Billy must've been in the kitchen as she noticed his bedroom door was open. She would not allow herself to have *whatever* that feeling of excitement is to grow, so she pushed it down so forcibly, so angrily, that she wouldn't have to pay it any more attention, so it couldn't possibly become more than what it already is.

Max took a deep breath as she began walking to the kitchen. Her ankle really was doing better, probably both thanks to the soothing heat of the shower and the comfortable security of the wrap on her ankle.

Before she saw him, she smelled him. Particularly his cigarette smoke drifting through the home. He must've been chain-smoking. Max huffed softly as she walked into the kitchen, seeing it was slightly hazy due to the grey smoke Billy allowed to fall from between his lips.

"Can't you smoke outside?" Max asked, sending Billy a very quick glare before heading to the fridge.

"Do *you* wanna smoke out there?" Billy asked with biting sarcasm, sending a glance to the still-strong storm outside.

Max took a moment to search for something to eat in the fridge, but there was hardly anything. The leftover pizza from the night before was still there, and there were a few cans of pop, but it really wasn't anything that sounded appetizing. In fact, the thought of eating pizza sounded rather unpleasant to Max.

"We need food." She finally settled on saying, closing the fridge's door. Billy rolled his eyes, shrugging his broad shoulders.

"And? I don't feel like shopping."

Max softly huffed as she stood across from Billy, leaning on the kitchen's island. That was the end of that. She knew it was almost impossible to force Billy to do something he didn't want it to do, but that was alright. She was sure she could find some canned soup to toss into a bowl and heat up on the stove.

Then, she felt it.

The familiarly appalling ache, just lower than her belly button. Faint, but there. She figured it was exactly what she was dreading most; her period. Well, the day *before* her period, to be more specific. Come tomorrow, she knew she'd be thoroughly miserable.

When it came to periods, Max almost always suffered. Some times were easier and less painful than others, but occasionally, having a period would completely ruin her. There were times she couldn't even keep any food down her cramps were so severe. She worried, for a quick moment, if her period would be like that this time around- with such gut-wrenchingly strong cramps she ends up throwing up.

Fuck, just the idea of telling Billy what's wrong with her made her feel strangely embarrassed, which she'd never felt before (not when it came to her period, at least.). Just when she thought things might be alright, biology turned her uterus into a traitor and her mind into something of a warzone.

## ***BILLY***

Blowing a thick cloud of silver smoke her way, Billy's gaze thinned as he studied her face. Although she appeared to be miles away, she looked, in all truth, worried. What exactly she had to be worried about, Billy had no clue, but he felt oddly inclined to ask how she was.

"You okay?" Billy asked, still with a stern, strong gaze.

Max's head snapped towards him, immediately frowning with some of the color draining from her face.

"Fine. Just uh... Wondering when the storm will stop." She said, although it sounded far more like a lie to Billy. He wasn't about to pressure her into telling him what's going through her mind, so he dropped it.

"Wanna come for a ride with me?" Oh... fuck. He almost couldn't believe he just asked her that, and Max looked equally surprised- all wide eyes and open lips.

The two of them hadn't ever ridden in his car before without it being a necessary occasion, like for school. They were hardly ever just... together.

"Look, if you don't wanna co-"

"No, I do." Max said, cutting him off. Billy sensed she could've been equally eager to get out of the house. Plus, it did seem her ankle wasn't hurting her as much anymore. "Where will we go?"

"To the store for beer and cigarettes," Billy replied, the tiniest of smirks pulling at the ends of his lips as he watched Max's face twist up in disapproval.

Beginning to walk to the door to put his coat and shoes on, Billy glanced back to the redhead. "And I guess while we're there, you can pick out something to eat for dinner." As he turned away, he caught it. The tiniest smile curling up to Max's lips.

For whatever reason, that smile Max had given him (no matter how unintentional it was) was enough to make Billy feel that twinge of pain again in his chest. Guilt. Seeing her smile was always such a rarity, but fuck, was it nice. It was a shame she didn't smile more often because it truly was a lovely occurrence when she did. Maybe, though, if Billy didn't act like such a dick towards her, she would smile more.

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Once the two had gotten out of the house and into the car, the energy between them felt like it had shifted yet again. It was this nameless awkwardness that he'd never felt before mixed with some other unidentifiable emotion.



One thing was for sure, though. Whatever he was feeling was because of Max... and that truth was terrifying.

## **MAX**

Although her ankle did hurt, anything was better than being locked up in that dry-walled cage, even if it did mean allowing for her thoughts to run wild as she sat there next to him.

Rain pattered against the windshield as he drove, still something of a downpour happening outside with dark, pregnant looking clouds above, but it was nothing like it was earlier in the day. It was far more manageable now.

It seemed the storm had officially taken with it any remnants of fall, leaving only dark grass and naked trees.

Glancing over to him, Max noticed how tightly clenched Billy's jaw was. Was he worried about something? Did he know something she didn't?

Whatever. That's not her problem. She should maybe try having a little faith in Billy; if something was really wrong, he would tell her.

Suddenly, things felt heavy because maybe he wouldn't tell her. Maybe he would just keep whatever is bothering him to himself. Maybe that's a good thing, too, because Max worries enough about shit as-is. Maybe, though, she should just ask.

"Are you alright?" She finally says, becoming acutely aware of how her voice sounded all too soft and completely unsure of herself.

Billy didn't look at her. As she glanced at him, she caught a frown between his brows before his face went back to being completely neutral- lacking any notable emotion or interest in her question.

He never did get around to answering her question, given he pulled into the parking lot of some cheap grocery store. He threw the car

into park before grabbing the keys from the ignition only to then begin getting out of the car.

God... she felt stupid for asking him if he's alright. Billy wasn't the type to ever talk about how he felt unless it was during a screaming match with his father, Neil. It was only then that you could hear all the hurt and anger and genuine upset in his voice.

As Max got out of the car, her skin was greeted with cold air and colder rain, making her immediately wish she'd brought an umbrella. Hell, to be perfectly honest, it made her wish they hadn't moved to Indiana. California never got this miserably cold.

Crossing her arms over her chest, Max followed behind Billy, keeping her eyes low to the ground.

"Get something easy to make, like a frozen dinner or something." Billy finally ended up saying, not even bothering to glance at her as he spoke. Before she could reply, he was off walking else were to get himself that beer he'd previously mentioned.

For whatever reason, that ignited something in Max. Now, all of a sudden after she asks if he's alright, he can't even bother to look at her when they talk?

With anger-flustered cheeks, Max marched off, trying her best to keep her mind on the task at hand- which was finding a frozen dinner to eat and not trying to figure out why Billy was always such an asshole.

She ended up exactly where she needed to be, in the annoyingly cold aisle with the long line frozen dinner options. She sighed quietly as she scanned over the different options, finally settling on something simple but somewhat bland. Vegetables, rice, and chicken sounded like it'd be the safest option, so it was what she settled on grabbing.

She, rather suddenly, felt something strange wash over her, something that made her heart pound just a little faster behind her ribs.

She took a second to glance around, and then she saw him, the

source of her discomfort. There was a man just standing there at the end of the aisle just watching Max. He was dressed in a slightly rain-soaked flannel and some dirty, mud-caked jeans. To put it simply, he looked rather unfriendly.

His gaze was so indescribably heavy and wrong, it made her stomach twist and her breath hitch. Deciding not to stand around much longer, beginning feeling like prey being watched by a predator, Max adjusted her jacket some so it covered more of her chest before turning away from the man and beginning to take quick, large steps to try to get away from him as swiftly as possible.

She could sense there wasn't something right with that man and the way he was looking at her. She'd felt the same unease before around other men, especially back in California.

She realized as she walked each aisle trying to look for Billy that maybe... maybe she was just overreacting. The man hadn't tried to come near her and he hadn't even spoken to her.

But still.

That feeling of unease settled itself in the pit of her stomach. It was only when she spotted a familiar mop of curly blond hair standing at the register that the unease began to dissipate.

In her eagerness to be near him again, to have that feeling of safety again, she accidentally bumped his arm, earning a weird glance mixed with a glare from Billy.

"What'd you get?"

"Oh, umm, just this." She set the bag of frozen food down to be rung up by the cashier. "Figured it'd be simple enough to make."

Billy didn't reply, only handing the cashier an approximated wad of cash. Max glanced around a few times to see if she spotted the guy anywhere near her again, and when she spotted him yet again, her stomach sank.

The two of them made eye contact, which Max immediately broke by looking away, moving ever-so-slightly closer to Billy.

## **BILLY**

When he felt her bump into him again, he snapped his head down to look at her, preparing to ask her what the *fuck* her problem was when he saw just how uncomfortable she looked.

"Is your ankle bothering you? If it is, just go sit in the car."

Max instantly looked up at him, shaking her head. "Um, no. It's fine." She left it at that, but Billy didn't believe her. Nothing about the look on her face said she was, in any sense of the word, fine.

When she glanced over her shoulder only to promptly look forward again, he could really tell something was up. As the cashier handed Billy his change, he followed Max's glance only to see the man causing her all of this stress. The way the man's eyes scanned over Max's body made Billy feel truly sick, so much so he had to put a stop to it.

Without much thought, Billy put his arm around Max's shoulders, glaring daggers at the man as he pulled her into his side, shoving the spare change into his pocket.

The man seemed to get the message, smugly turning away as he realized Billy was not someone to be messed with.

"Let's go." Billy whispered lowly to Max, grabbing hold of the bags carrying his free hand. Still, he held her firmly to his side as the two of them walked from the store. He could feel his heart pounding rapidly behind his ribs, so quickly, in fact, it almost frightened him. But he told himself it was just because of how creepy that guy was. It definitely wasn't anything more than that, because it couldn't have been.

## **MAX**

The weight of his arm draped around her shoulder was both uncomfortable and comforting all at the same time. It felt right. Proper, even. Like it was something meant to happen. But it also felt wrong. Not so wrong, though, that she felt the need to squirm out from under his half-embrace.

It made Max feel looked after and safe and... glad. Glad she was around Billy then.

But none of that was an issue. The issue was Max herself. That small action, having his arm around her shoulders, felt as though it had fanned the very faintest of sparks that now grew into a fire that burned through her chest.

Through that one small action, the tiniest seedling of a crush was now blossoming itself into a raging fire Max had no control over.

She had a crush her fucking step-brother. What the *fuck*. She must be sick. Like, actually mentally deranged. A '*send her to the rubber motel*' kind of fucked up. But for as much as she silently berated herself, she couldn't help but smile just a bit at the fact he did care.

She may be a twisted fuck, but all that registered in her mind was that she wanted more. More conversations, more caring moments, more tenderness, more touches, more *him* .

Oh, what a tangled web she's gotten herself into.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

hi there! eliza here :)

i know it's been a while since i've last updated this story, but goodness haha. it's been hard to find time to sit down and write, but i finally did it! i honestly wrote way more than i thought i was going to, so please feel free to give me your thoughts on the story so far! honestly, feedback is always beyond helpful to me as a writer.

anyway, thanks for being patcient & for reading the story all the way through. have a wonderful day ♥

## 5. dont get used to this pt. 1

### ***BILLY***

As soon as the two of them had gotten outside, Billy allowed his arm to drop from her shoulder, which somehow felt like it was the wrong thing to do. He, in all truth, sort of liked having her that close to him.

He knew it would be easier to sum it up as being nothing more than him being protective of her, and so he did, because that was easier than admitting whatever it was he felt. It was nothing more than him putting his arm around her to keep her safe. Which, in turn, kept him safe from his father.

How could something so small feel simultaneously like the perfect thing to do-like the thing you were *meant* to do, but also like what you're doing is deeply wrong?

Wordlessly, Billy unlocked the car, getting in before reaching back and placing the bag on the back seat.

He didn't bother to look at Max because he was pretty sure he knew what he would see. Crimson cheeks and wide, impossibly blue eyes studying him and his motives, again with that feral cat look.

Max joined him in the car. He could *feel* her eyes on him, carefully observing his every move. To try and banish whatever icky awkwardness that was falling over them, Billy turned the car on, then the radio as he pulled out of his parking spot.

He ran a hand through his rain-dampened hair, pulling his bottom lip between his teeth as he tried to navigate what it was he felt and, most importantly, why he felt it.

"Are you okay?" Max asked. Her voice was solid, like she wasn't just going to take a 'yep' as the answer she was looking for.

Billy sighed deeply, his chest compressing under his leather jacket. Why did she care? She shouldn't. Caring just gets people hurt.

"Yeah, Max. I'm fine." Billy said, keeping his gaze locked on the rain-slicked road before them. Why did she expect him to be honest with her? Most of the time, Billy couldn't even be honest with himself- let alone another person.

"Well, you don't look okay." Max said, but there was no accusation in her voice, just simple observance.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Billy asked defensively, frowning as he pressed slightly on the gas. Speed was good. Speed helped distract him.

"I dunno, just..." Max shrugged. From his peripheral, he could tell she forced herself to look out of the window. "You said I could come to you if I needed to talk. I guess I don't- I just want you to know I'm here for you too. If you need someone, I mean."

Silence.

Suddenly, the heat coming from the heater felt like it was choking Billy, so he cracked his window a bit to get fresh air. His grip on the steering-wheel became tighter, so tight that he felt his pulse in his hands.

What was he supposed to say? Thank you? No. That'd make him sound weak. So... Maybe he should just brush it off.

"What are you going on about? I-" He stopped himself. Brushing off her kindness was wrong. He sounded downright cruel. Fuck. He sounded like his father. "I'm just fine, Max. This fuckin' town just sucks."

"I know..." Max mumbled softly before taking a deep breath. "But it could be worse. At least Hawkins doesn't have LA traffic."

Billy wanted to roll his eyes and crack a smile at the same time, but instead, he kept a straight, cold gaze. He knew she was right. Things could always become worse.



## **MAX**

"How do you do it?" He asks, finally taking a moment to glance over at her as he rolled his window up. "Being positive about shit like this."

Max smiled a tiny half-smile and shrugged as she looked at the leaf-covered, rain-dampened road before them. "I dunno. I just sorta think of it as a new beginning. New towns mean you can be whoever you want to be."

Billy didn't reply, but that was alright. He didn't have to. She knew he understood what she was trying to say.

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After eating dinner comfortably alone in her room, Max busied herself by reading a comic with her ankle propped up on a pillow. She needed some alone time to process all the feelings swirling around in her mind and chest, and she thought reading a comic book might just be the perfect thing to put her mind at ease. Her plan, however, failed massively given she could hardly focus on the pages.

Something just kept making her think about Billy. There must be something truly wrong with her to be developing a crush on her step-brother... But at least they weren't related by blood. Not that that lessened the strangeness of the entire situation she found herself in.

Although the sky outside her window was a deep navy blue, the clock on her nightstand read 7:18 PM in red, digital numbers. Although the night was young, Max had to admit she felt exhausted.

Not just physically, but also mentally. It was as though Billy had plagued a part of her mind, making it think about him constantly.

She sighed, closing the comic and tossing it on her nightstand before running her hands over her face, squeezing her eyes closed until she saw nothing but pure darkness. The fire that now burnt within her was startling in how rapidly it was morphing, growing, consuming.

Sleep would help, surely. Plus, come tomorrow, things will probably be back to normal given that's when Neil and Susan should be coming back.

With that in mind, Max shut her light off before allowing herself to drift off to sleep.

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The sun slowly rose over the now-dead looking trees and frosted over grass, allowing for rays of warm sunshine to softly kiss Max's freckled skin through the curtains.

Max's face scrunched up in discomfort as the bright morning light eventually woke her.

And then she felt it. The feeling she'd been dreading, but knew would eventually arrive.

A cramp, brutally sharp and scarily strong, wrapped it's brutal clutch around Max's lower stomach, making her sit up immediately and hurl forward as a slow hiss escaped her lips.

She genuinely felt as though she might get sick. *Fuck*. How was she supposed to get through today- let alone the next five?

As quickly as her pained ankle would allow her, Max slowly swung her legs over her bed before planting her feet on the ground. She needed to get some pain medication in her before Billy noticed something was wrong. Somehow, her badly bruised and still-swollen ankle hurt less than the traitor that was her uterus.

Promptly, she stood up before beginning to hobble her way to the

bathroom. It was too early for this bullshit. Having a hurt ankle is one thing, but having to deal with everything that came with having a period was a completely other, significantly worse thing.

Swiftly closing the bathroom door, Max shimmied from her pajama bottoms and plopped herself down on the toilet. She felt tears prick her eyes as another particularly painful cramp twisted through her stomach as she hunched over, gripping her stomach.

The cramps came in waves; some stronger than others, some shorter, but all especially painful.

Usually, her periods were bad, but not *this* bad. This was something different- a new territory of bad.

She knew she could maybe call her mom up and ask if there was any tips she had on dealing with cramps this bad but Max was stubborn. Unless she genuinely thought she was dying, she *would not* ask for help relating to this topic, especially if her mother would be the person she'd be asking.

\*  
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Although she would have preferred to of taken a shower, Max knew she'd probably end up feeling faint afterward due to the heat. She ended up taking some time to clean herself up a little before making her way to the kitchen to get some pain killers.

It felt so uncomfortable in the house due to its silence. There was no early morning television playing, no sound of arguing. Hell, even the birds outside were eerily quiet. She never liked it when it was this quiet.

Max walked as quietly as possible on the cold kitchen tile, trying her best not to make a sound as she reached the medicine cabinet. Although she had a distaste for the silence that surrounded her, she equally disliked being the source of any loud noises- especially this early in the morning. As she got herself the medication, she thought

about what today was going to look like.

Her parents would probably be home by dinner, but that was at least twelve hours away, which meant she might get to have more of that confusingly wanted attention from Billy. Something peculiar twisted her stomach up- a cocktail of eagerness and excitement, topped strongly by the overall feeling of embarrassment.

This was wrong. Whatever feelings she had for her step-brother were wrong and *not* to be acted on.

So, as she swallowed a couple of tiny red pills with some water, Max decided she would try her best to ignore the fire burning within her mind because, not only did it terrify her what little control she had over it, but it also wasn't something she felt was... normal.

Even though she wasn't ever someone to try and be normal, she did, however, fear what Billy might think about this. He would be disgusted with her- he would probably never want to see her again.

And, given there was absolutely no way he felt the same way she felt about him, it was better to try and ignore whatever she's feeling, because maybe then, like a forgotten and uncared for plant, the feeling would shrivel up in the back of her mind and die.

\*  
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After munching on some toast for breakfast (given it was the only thing she felt she could keep down), Max was able to drift off to sleep on the living room couch once the medicine had kicked in. She was comfortably curled up in the fetus position with her back turned to the tv, face pleasantly nuzzled into a cushion with a blanket lazily hanging off her.

Much to Max's distaste, though, that peaceful, pain-free rest didn't last might longer.

Her whole body shifted as someone sat next to her, pulling her mind

from whatever slumber she was attempting to get and to that asshole beside her who probably had a shit-eating grin on his face.

Max mumbled some inaudible curses as she sat herself up, glaring icy daggers at the annoyingly smirking man beside her.

"Sorry. Did I wake you, Sleeping Beauty?"

Max huffed through her nose and pulled the blanket closer to her chest, trying her best to turn her attention to the tv. Her face felt tense with annoyance, particularly due to the question surrounding why he always had to find a way to bug her.

"Geez..." Billy mumbled with a roll of his eyes. "I was kidding. You've gotta stop taking shit so seriously, Max."

Max only replied with another glare. He was becoming more and more unappealing by the very second.

"What the hell has gotten into you?" Billy asked with a strange look of annoyance and genuine concern brewing behind his eyes.

"I'm sick." Max muttered.

Billy moved away from her slightly, frowning. "Sick how?"

"Don't worry, you're not gonna catch it!" Max snapped as a particularly painful cramp gripped her whole body, crimson blush dusting over her cheeks as she realized how child-like she sounded in her reply. God... she was absolutely right. He could never have feelings for her.

Before she even knew what was happening, Billy was stood up in front of her, completely invading personal space before tentatively guiding her chin up so he could study her face.

"I wasn't fucking around when I said you could tell me stuff. So, I'll ask again. What's wrong?" His expression was that previous odd mixture of annoyance and concern. His gaze was so heavy, so warm, it felt like he actually might have cared.

Max glanced away awkwardly, pulling her chin from his gentle grip.

"It's ok... I mean, it's nothing really, it's just... women's stuff" She wasn't sure why she was being shy about it because she knew it was totally normal... but still. Telling Billy about what was going on with her made her want to cringe given she was sure she was probably a blushing, gross mess.

A look of dawning comprehension slowly overtook his features as he now moved back to his side of the couch. It seemed Max didn't need to do much more explaining after she said that.

"Are you cold?" Billy asked, and Max frowned slightly. She was cold-even with a blanket and some warm clothes on. The house was always too damn cold, especially in the morning. But that was "the way Neil liked it" so that was also the way it had to stay.

"Yeah... A little."

Before Max could say anything more, Billy tugged her gently by the arm before pulling her closer, allowing for his arm to drape over her shoulder and onto her waist as her back laid on his chest.

"It's... Umm..." Max didn't know what to say. Her heart felt as though it was trying to fling itself from her ribcage, but Billy's couldn't be more steady. She could just barely hear it, thumping gently behind his chest, which somehow led to her forgetting whatever it was she was trying to say. But that didn't seem to matter.

Billy only let out a slow sigh, as though this were totally normal to him. "I don't envy you chicks at *all*. Mother Nature really screwed you guys over." He said softly, almost like he understood what Max was feeling.

It was strange to feel understood around Billy, given he was, for such a long time, the source of nothing more than pain and annoyance. Now, not only was he capable of being caring but he's also even sort of capable of understanding her in a way- which was oddly validating. She adjusted herself so her ear was on his chest, allowing for her to watch the tv.

As much as she didn't want to admit it, she wanted to stay laid on his chest for as long as possible. Or, at least that's how she felt towards

this newly shown side of Billy. The kind, understanding side that seemed to have been tucked away under a pile of anger and hatred.

The only thing she couldn't seem to understand was why Billy was only now beginning to show this side of himself to her. Is it because Neil is gone, or is it something more than that?

"Have you taken- like, pain killers and stuff?" Billy asked, and Max almost wanted to laugh. She could tell he was a bit uncomfortable given the lack of a smirk on his lips, but he didn't seem to mind his discomfort too much. Now, given he showed further proof that he might sort of care, she really wanted to know why he was being so nice to her. It wasn't like she could just ask him, though.

"Y-Yeah," Max said through gritted teeth as yet another cramp shot pain through her entire body. Her eyes tightly shut and her bottom lip was pulled between her teeth in an attempt to breathe through the pain, but it- even along-side the medicine- didn't seem to aid in lessening her cramps.

Billy, seeing she was obviously in pain, quickly got up from the couch, causing Max to fall back with a look of both shock and hurt in her eyes. Why was he getting up? Did she do something wrong?

Before she could ask, Billy glanced back to her with a tiny smirk curled to his lips. "I'll be right back."

And just like that, Max was alone again. Alone, cold, in pain, and with a million damned thoughts speeding through her mind. This is exactly what she didn't want to be feeling. There was such undeniable loneliness now that Billy was gone.

Fuck- this really has to stop- she needs to stop nurturing whatever one-sided fantasy, no matter how pleasant the time spent recently with Billy has been. Since when did she become so powerless to the whims of her emotions?

Before she could bring herself down any further, the curly-haired devil reappeared proudly displaying a tiny, gold-lidded glass jar in the palm of his hand.

He motioned with a jerk of his head for her to move, and she did as told. He, again, plopped down on the couch, laying down slightly before tugging Max back onto him. It was wild to Max how he could grab her with such ease- almost as if she were a ragdoll.

"What are you doing...?" Max looked up to him, head on his muscled chest as she searched for any answer in his expression to her question.

"This shit'll help you." Billy said, opening the tiny glass jar up before Max so she could see. Printed on the side was artwork depicting a leaping tiger, along with a language Max couldn't exactly recognize.

"What is it?" Max hadn't ever seen anything like it before. It was a reddish-brown in color with a strong, sharp smell of cloves, menthol, and cinnamon.

"Tiger Balm. It's a muscle relaxant. I use it after working out on sore muscles so, ya know, I'm assuming it'll help you."

Before Max could reply, Billy was pulling the blanket from her body. She frowned slightly, now cold as she looked up to him. "What are you doing?"

"Jesus, Max, enough with the questions. Just trust me." And for whatever reason, she did.

Max put her arms to her side after Billy pulled her closer to him. Then, he began rolling the edge of her shirt up, revealing milky, yet still freckled skin. He stopped rolling her shirt up until just under her breasts before swirling two long fingers around the jar.

"Pull your pants down a little. Just to your hips." He instructed coolly.

Max could feel her heart racing in her chest as *something* broke free through her ribcage, making her suddenly feel intensely hesitant as she realized he was about to touch her... but the thought of him touching her made her skin prickle with goosebumps. Was it pleasure? Anticipation? Or could it be something worse, something scarier, like lust.

Max did as told, tugging her pants down awkwardly until they



reached hip-bone length, revealing countless freckles and more pale skin. She shivered slightly against Billy as he looked down to her face, seeking approval before touching her.

Once he got the nod he'd been looking for, he began to gently massage the balm into the skin between her bellybutton and the very edge of her pants, just barely above what would be considered inappropriate.

At first, Max couldn't even feel the balm he'd applied because of how many miles per hour her mind was racing, but then it began to slowly warm up with the aid of Billy's careful massage. The pressure from his fingers combined with the warmth of the balm earned a quiet groan from the redhead as she curled herself slightly further into his touch.

As she realized the noise that had just escaped her, she immediately closed her eyes in horror. Maybe he hadn't heard-

"You like that?" Billy asked with a playful smirk adorning his face, knowing perfectly well that the answer would be yes.

## ***BILLY***

He dipped his fingers into the balm again, returning his gentle fingers to her lower belly. He could tell she couldn't even look at him- that she was flustered beyond functioning.

And for whatever reason, the fact that he was capable of making her feel better made him feel better than he had felt in a while. In all truth, trying to be helpful and kind to Max was sort of helping Billy as well. It made him feel less like a terrible human and more like someone good... Even if he stopped feeling like a good person if he thought too hard on what he and Max were doing.

He knew touching her like this was beyond inappropriate for step-siblings, but he also knew Max would stop him if she weren't okay with this. And, it did seem to legitimately seem to help her. So, there

Billy was, able to justify yet another thing because it made him feel better and less like a terrible person.

A soft gasp from Max broke him from his thoughts. He stopped massaging, feeling she likely had more than enough balm applied to her skin for now. He reached over to the coffee table, setting the tiger balm down for the time being before allowing Max to again curl up to him.

"Feel better?" Billy asked. Max met his gaze, smiling a tiny bit before nodding.

"Now you can stop your moaning and whining." He muttered lowly, trying his best to keep a steady tone. He didn't need her to know helping her made him feel like a good person. He couldn't imagine her knowing the things she'd made him feel over the past few days.

Like hope.

Hope that, maybe, Neil was wrong about him- about everything. Maybe Billy could be good if he tried. Maybe he could love and be loved.

Max huffed softly, but Billy could tell she was smiling too.

Billy's hand rubbed circles over her shirt on her belly, which he pretended to be absentminded as he watched the tv, but really, he did it because he was sure it made her feel better.

And, making her feel better also managed to make him feel better, and how bad could that be? They both win in the end, so why does it feel so wrong. So taboo.

Maybe there was something about it feeling wrong that also had an appeal to it. Whatever Billy felt may have been going on between them, he could tell it was something he'd never felt before- at least, not this intensely.

After a couple of minutes of zoning out as Max laid there on him, he realized she was either already asleep or was about to be.

"Don't get used to this." He whispered softly under his breath, mostly

to himself, but just loudly enough to stir her from whatever sleep she was attempting. "I refuse to become your personal masseuse."

His hand only stopped rubbing tiny, muscle-relaxing circles on her belly when he grabbed the blanket he'd tossed off of her earlier. He, careful to not move too much, laid the blanket over their bodies again before allowing his hand to return to her waist, pulling himself ever-so-slightly closer to her.

He could feel his own eyes growing heavier and heavier by the minute. At first, he fought off his sleepiness as best as possible, trying to remind himself this is wrong, but he was simply too comfortable there with her on his chest to fight against sleep any longer.

After all, what's the worst a little nap could do?

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

hi there! eliza here :)

firstly, i just wanna apologize for how long it's taken me to upload this chapter. i really just didn't have the motivation to finish it, but here we are now! hopefully, ill have a more normal upload schedule soon. (i'm planning on aiming to update every saturday, but i can't make any promises yet!)

sadly, the co-editor of this story has decided they no longer want to be involved in this fic, which is totally alright, but it may result in an iffy upload schedule, so please just keep that in mind

also, if you have any thoughts on this story so far, please feel free to share them! i'd love to hear from you & it'd probably help with this funky case of writers block ive gotten lmao

ps. if you're a person who suffers from painful period cramps, tiger balm might be able to help you! if you do end up using it, just be sure to wash your hands afterward! thanks for reading this all :) i hope you have a lovely day

## 6. don't get used to this pt. 2

**MAX**

When Max woke up from her nap, she found there to be nothing but silence to be surrounding her. The TV had been shut off and Billy wasn't anywhere to be felt, heard, or seen. She rubbed the sleep from her eyes, yawning quietly as she sat up.

How long was she out for? Sleep still heavy on her eyes, Max blinked a few times as she stared at the clock on the wall. Eventually, her vision sorted itself out and Max read the time to be 1:34 pm.

"Jesus..." She softly mumbled to herself. The more awake she felt, the more aware of the growing ache in her lower stomach she became. It was probably about time she took another pain killer.

And then, she heard him. Billy. It was muffled due to him being locked away in his room, but the walls were thin enough to let her listen in on his conversation.

"Okay... Then when will you be home?" Billy asked, annoyance just barely being held back in his voice. Upon hearing how much he was fighting to stay respectful, Max managed to force herself up onto her feet, stopping only a moment to acknowledge the dull pain in her ankle. Impressively, the wrap did aid in lessening the pain, making it more manageable. He was probably talking to Neil or Susan. She slowly began to walk to her room, which was thankfully next to his own, meaning she'd be able to better hear whatever conversation Billy sounded so pissed off at.

"What? No- Susan, it's fine. We're fine."

Max reached her room, plopping down on her bed. She played with the ends of her copper hair, breathing deeply as she felt a mild cramp twinge throughout her lower stomach and back.

Billy went silent for a little while before finally saying "Alright... See

you tomorrow."

Max frowned. What'd he mean by ' *tomorrow*' ? Weren't they supposed to come back today? Realizing she should probably just ask him, she stood up and carefully walked to his door.

She knocked twice before nudging it open, spotting Billy sat on his bed by an open window with what she realized to be an unlit joint held lazily between two fingers.

Billy looked completely unfazed; his heavy-lidded gaze locking with her own slightly confused gaze.

"Don't you want to wait to smoke that? I mean, what if they smell it." She leaned on the doorway, crossing her arms over her chest. "Aren't they gonna be home soon?" Max asks, and Billy smiles a bit before looking away.

## ***BILLY***

She was kinda cute when she asked questions like that; her head tilted somewhat to the side, her large blue eyes distractingly bright. "They aren't coming home tonight."

Billy watches Max as she watches him fish a white lighter from his jean pocket. She's frowning, searching for any sign of deception. "What? When will they be home then?" She asks

"Close the door and I'll tell you." Billy finally says, a smirk pulling to his lips. She hesitated a moment as if trying to work out whatever it was he had planned, only to find herself sighing as she closed the door.

He lit the joint up with his lighter, allowing for the fire to consume some of the tip before blowing it out and taking a drag, inhaling deeply. He leaned towards his window and exhaled, a white stream of smoke coming from his partially parted pink lips.

Even just considering offering drugs to your underage step-sister whilst also underage probably isn't a good idea, but Billy knew it would help her with her cramps given it always managed to help him when he was hurt. And, no matter how much he hated admitting this to himself, he wanted to know what she was like high.

He could still remember the first time he smoked and how it brought out a more pleasant side to him- one that was naturally more empathetic and kind. It was the side of himself that often gets kept at an arms-length given his preference for alcohol. Alcohol brought out anger and resentment in Billy; a passionate storm of aggressiveness he lost more and more control over with each sip that burned its way down his throat.

Taking another drag, he watched as Max stood by the door, still with her arms folded over her chest as she... studied him? Her gaze was intense and unfamiliar, somewhat uneasy in the way it flicked from the joint in his hand to different objects around his room.

"You gonna stand there all day or what?" Smoke laced each word he spoke, and Max simply sighed, releasing her arms to her side as she shuffled over to his bed, plopping down on the very edge

## **MAX**

"That shit stinks." She says with a particularly scrunched-up nose, and Billy half-smirks as he stares at her.

"That means it's good," He says, and she can feel him watching her as she crosses her hurt ankle over her thigh, fingers absentmindedly beginning to fidget with the ends of the ACE bandage on her foot.

This felt... strange. Being here with him in his room. But it didn't feel wrong. Or, at least, it didn't feel as wrong as Max thought it should've.

She was torn from her thoughts when she felt his hand nudge her shoulder. When she turned to see what he wanted, the joint was right

in front of her face held thoughtfully between two fingers.

A frown shadowed over her face "Uhh..." She had yet to break her gaze from the joint held just inches from her face, blue-toned smoke curling and twisting before her.

"Do you trust me?"

"What?" Max asked, her frown turning into something of a glare as she pushed his hand away from her face. She knows what her answer should be; no. Plain and simple. She knows she should not trust him, and yet a part of her still does. Wary, but still trusting.

"Well, do you?" He asked, his heavy-lidded gaze meeting hers.

"I-I mean," She sighs, shrugs, and begins again playing with the ACE bandage on her foot. "I guess."

Billy smirks a bit, content with her answer. "Then try this." This time around, he holds the joint between his middle, pointer, and thumb, as if presenting it to her. "It'll help."

Max's gaze fell to the joint as she began weighing her options. He could use this against her, maybe... but no, he's not that stupid. He wouldn't snitch on her because he knows Neil wouldn't see this as Billy trying to help her. If she rejects this offer, she knows he'll take it personally. He seems like he really is trying to help... So maybe this isn't the worst thing.

Cautiously, she took the joint from him, holding it between her middle and pointer like a cigarette.

She feels a cramp twist through her lower abdomen, and before she allows herself to really feel the pain course through her, her lips are on the joint and she just barely inhales.

She coughs up smoke, gasps for clean air, and feels her eyes grow teary as she hands the joint back to a smiling Billy, other hand going to her throat. "Fuck," She with a slight rasp, throat already sore from coughing

"Here." Billy tosses her a water bottle from his nightstand, which she

drinks from carefully. She stares off for a moment, feeling Billy watching her as some unnamed pleasantness found itself curling around her brain. It was hardly much, but it was definitely something.

"So uh, why aren't they coming home tonight?" Max asks before again sipping from the water bottle. She felt a little better, truthfully, and the fact she had Billy to thank again for helping her to not feel like such shit was kind of mindboggling for her when considering how long he was the direct cause of her feeling like shit.

Billy hits the joint again, breathing smoke out the open window, and Max wonders for a second how he keeps from coughing. "Something about a meeting being on the wrong date. Didn't really care to ask further than that,"

Cold November air snuck through the window, causing Max to shiver slightly. As much as she wished she could explain it, she felt herself growing weirdly thankful for the mess up that kept Neil and Susan gone.

"C'mere." Billy says, and Max felt her heart skip a beat. She looked at him, chewing the inside of her cheek for a moment before carefully complying, being sure to move slowly as to not further fuck her foot up.

"Sit by the window and *try* to get some smoke out of it this time," Billy says, and there's this teasing meanness in his tone that makes Max roll her eyes as she took the joint from him again.

She brought it to her lips, inhaled, and, as expected, began coughing mercilessly as she leaned near the window. Billy let out a humored sigh, mumbling a quick "Jesus, kid." under his breath.

Max leaned back against the wall, head tilted up to the ceiling. "Can I..." She frowns as she speaks, realizing she didn't want her question to be taken the wrong way.

"Finish your thought. 'Can you' what?" Reaching slightly, he took the joint from her before leaning his back against the wall as well. Between them was the window, slowly flowing fall air into the room.



"How long have you been smoking?" She asks. She knows if she were a bit soberer, she probably would've kept her mouth shut. But she liked learning about Billy because it helped her to better understand him.

For the longest time, the only thing she understood about him was that he did not want to be understood, but now... these slivers of kindness he's shown her only helped to heighten her curiosity.

"A while." He says, and Max watches as his face faults to a frown for a split second as if he'd thought of something painful. "Too long, probably." He passes her the joint after flicking off some ash into the ashtray on the windowsill.

"What's that supposed to mean?" Max asks, bringing the joint to her lips.

Billy watches her inhale, a small smirk growing on his features. "Not a damn thing."

Max made a mental note of the cryptic comments he made before exhaling into a coughing fit, reaching for the water bottle. The back of her throat felt sore, but her mind felt better. Hell, she could even admit to herself that he was right about the weed helping with her ankle and cramps.

She realizes then, as the pleasantness more intensely fogs her brain and her throat aches with a dry pain, that she wants nothing more than to know him. To know him the way he knows himself. There's still so much she has to yet learn about him, about who he is and why he's that way.

She knows only what he wants her to know, but sitting there with him, she knows there's more. More to be discovered, more to be fascinated by, more to be earned.

### **Notes for the Chapter:**

well howdy :)

i realize its been a while since i wrote for this story,  
and a lot has been happening in my personal life, but

i've finally just said 'fuck it' and got to writing lmao. forgive me if this chapter is shitty or off, it really has been a while since i last wrote. (hopefully i'll get back into the habit of more regular uploads soon though!)

if you've got any thoughts on the chapter or story, please send them my way! thank you so much for reading

ps. i also just wanted to say thank you for all the love this story has received <3 even when i wasn't regularly uploading, i'd still receive some of the loveliest comments that'd just fr brighten my day. know that i do read all the comments, and i do appreciate them beyond what words could ever express <33

### **Author's Note:**

I'm still not exactly sure where I'd like to take this story or if I want to make it platonic or romantic, but I definitely do want to continue the story haha.

If you have any thoughts or opinions on my story, feel free to comment em' below!

Thank you for reading this story all the way through, & have a beautiful day